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ABSTRACT

Children of active parents tend to be more active. This Digest describes the various socialization factors that influence a child's interest and involvement in physical activity. While role modeling exerts some effect, recent research suggests that the nature of parental influence may be much more complex. A useful theoretical model to explain parental influence on physical activity is the expectancy-value model of Eccles and Harold (1991). The model explains parent socialization behaviors related to sport and physical activity. There are various ways that parents can socialize their children to be physically active, including using parental encouragement, parental involvement, parental facilitation, and parental role modeling. Declining levels of physical activity exert a major influence on the increasing levels of childhood obesity. It is important for children to begin developing healthy activity patterns early in life. Because activity patterns have been found to track over the lifespan, efforts to promote physical activity at a young age can have major long-term public health benefits. (Contains 16 references.) (SM)

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Promoting Physical Activity in Children: Parental Influences

Gregory J. Welk

Do the children of active parents tend to be more active? Many physical educators and scientists believe so (Freedson & Everson, 1991; Moore, et al., 1991). Because of the potential benefits for public health, promoting parent involvement was recently highlighted as one of the key recommendations in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Guidelines for School and Community Physical Activity Programs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997).

The purpose of this Digest is to describe the various socialization factors that influence a child's interest and involvement in physical activity. Until recently, the most common factor was thought to be role modeling—children with active parents want to emulate those same behaviors. While role modeling probably exerts some effect, recent research suggests that the nature of parental influence may be much more complex. For example, in one study, positive links were observed between parent and child activity levels, but direct support from significant others (parents, brothers and sisters, close friends) exerted a much greater influence on a child's activity behavior (Anderssen & Wold, 1992). Others argue that parental encouragement, support, and beliefs may be more powerful influences than role modeling (Brustad, 1996; Kimiecik & Horn, 1998).

Parental Influence: A Theoretical Perspective

A useful theoretical model to explain parental influence on physical activity is the expectancy-value model of Eccles and Harold (1991). This model was originally developed to explain parental socialization behaviors in other achievement-related areas, such as academic performance. However, it offers clear and practical applications to the study of sport and physical activity. In this model, socialization behaviors are thought to be influenced jointly by parental expectation for the child's success in a given area and the value parents place on this success. Parents who expect that their children can be successful in sports or physical activity and who value success in this area will be more likely to influence their children to pursue this behavior.

According to this model, the tendency for parents to accept gender-role stereotypes influences the nature and extent of socialization behavior. For example, parents who believe that boys should be more involved in sports and physical activities than girls may work harder to promote activity among boys. In addition, parents may encourage an apparently gifted child and may de-emphasize activity with a lesser-skilled child. In either case, the resulting socialization process can become a self-fulfilling prophecy that tracks a child into patterns of physical activity or physical inactivity.

Types of Socialization Influence

There are various ways that parents can socialize their children to be physically active. Four different socialization variables especially influence physical activity behaviors in children:

Parental Encouragement

Parental encouragement refers to obvious verbal or nonverbal forms of encouragement for a child to be active. There could be direct efforts to get a child to play outside or to reduce TV viewing, or indirect efforts to promote interest and involvement. Numerous studies have confirmed that young children rely heavily on adults (especially parents) as sources of information regarding their physical abilities (Weiss, Ebbeck, & Horn, 1997). A child's perception of physical competency has consistently been found to correlate with physical activity involvement (Welk, 1999). Adult encouragement indirectly influences a child's level of vigorous activity by enhancing his/her perception of competence (Biddle & Goudas, 1996). Thus, parental efforts to build competence and a sense of mastery are likely to promote physical activity involvement.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement refers to direct assistance or involvement in the child's activity. This could include family walks, playing catch, or practicing physical skills. While the activity itself has important benefits for physical development, the involvement of the parents also demonstrates to their children that they feel physical activity is important.

Parental Facilitation

Parental facilitation refers to efforts by parents to make it easier for children to be physically active. Examples of ways that parents facilitate physical activity in children are by providing access to facilities and programs (Craig, Goldberg, & Dietz, 1996; Trost et al., 1997) and by helping children obtain equipment (Stucky-Ropp & DiLorenzo, 1993). Providing access to physical activity is an increasingly important responsibility because many aspects of society make it harder for children to be physically active. Parental concerns (real or perceived) about the safety of parks and playgrounds and an increasing reliance on after-school programs are two factors that contribute to physical inactivity in children. Because these factors are out of a child's control, parents need to accept responsibility for finding opportunities for children to be physically active on a daily basis.

Parental Role Modeling

Role modeling refers to a parent's efforts to model an active lifestyle for their child. According to social cognition theory (a major theory of human behavior), modeling promotes self-efficacy (confidence in one's ability to perform a behavior) and also informs the child of what is important or valued (Bandura,

1997). While involvement in structured exercise or sport programs may spark a child's interest, it is equally important for parents to model healthy activity patterns in their day to day life. Examples would be walking to the store, doing yardwork, or otherwise seeking opportunities to be physically active.

Helping Children Become More Active

Many concerns have been raised about the increasing levels of obesity among children in our population (Troiano & Flegal, 1998). While a variety of factors contribute to this effect, it is likely that declining levels of physical activity exert a major influence. Many professionals have sought answers to why children become inactive with age, but it is really not a surprising trend. In some ways, society has engineered physical activity out of our lives and made it easier for people to be inactive. Children who may be naturally active at young ages learn (through a variety of socialization influences) to adapt to the sedentary patterns of living that our culture embraces. From this perspective, they don't really become less active with age, they just become adults! Parents who encourage, facilitate, and role model physical activity and who participate with their children can help them avoid the trend toward inactivity as they approach adolescence.

In past generations, children typically walked to school and played outside after school. Today, the majority of children are driven to school and are in extended day programs after school. Because of these changing trends, parents need to make a more concerted effort to help their child develop an active lifestyle. Parents may accept responsibility for socializing their child to have good manners and to be considerate of others but may not consider the physical domain as part of their responsibility. Many may assume that children receive their physical education through school. While physical education provides children with a variety of educational and behavioral experiences, the limited amount of time in the curriculum is not sufficient for promoting activity or fitness. For children to develop active patterns of living, it is important for them to receive activity-promoting messages and experiences at home.

Parents can clearly have a major impact on the development of active lifestyles in their children. Because activity patterns have been found to track over the lifespan, efforts to promote activity at a young age can have major public health benefits (Malina, 1996). To make use of this potential intervention target, more work is needed to characterize and document the nature and extent of parental influence on physical activity behavior in children.

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